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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether alumni who were resident assistants (RAs) gave more to the institution than did alumni who were not RAs. This information was deemed significant for two reasons: (1) contributions from graduates are increasingly important sources of funds for colleges and universities; (2) information on why alumni contribute is important for future fund-raising efforts. Data were obtained from a random sample of 300 alumni who had graduated between 1975 and 1990 from a private university in Alabama; the data set included 10 alumni from each year who had been RAs and 10 from each year who had not been RAs. Data collected on RAs indicated that their demographic profile included the following characteristics: they were non-donors to the university, residents of Alabama, non-participants in alumni activities, female, Baptist, education majors, married, and had two children. For those former RAs who did provide contributions, the average gift size was $103, with a range of $10 to $2,500. It was also found that individuals who were RAs graduated in an average of 4.07 years, compared to 4.103 years for non-RAs. Involvement by RAs in giving and volunteering were both determined to be low, but positive. (Contains 17 references.) (MDM)

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Resident Assistant Service as a Correlate to Higher Education Fund Raising

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Resident Assistant Service as a Correlate to Higher Education Fund Raising

The growing importance of alumni funding for higher education is projected to continue as the fragility and uncertainty of state and federal subsidies for education intensifies (Bollag, 1995). There are many factors suggesting this fragility and uncertainty: falling college enrollments, increasing demands for accountability, more part-time students, reductions in public funding, tuition-based revenues, and most recently, the trend toward user fees (Wilson, 1995). In some institutions, lower teaching loads in pursuit of a research mission have increased costs in other areas. The current discussion focuses on the role of former resident assistants as individuals who continue to help the institution by providing contributions.

Higher education leaders are realizing the importance of alumni support, viewing these contributions as the financial backbone of education institutions (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Financial contributions from alumni constituted the greatest source of voluntary support for higher education in 1992. Alumni giving increased by over 75% between 1985 and 1992, by which time it represented more than 27% of total voluntary contributions to higher education (American Association of Fund Raising Council, 1994). Alumni donations take on special significance in times of financial strain on an institution, and often provide the resources to cover the margin of expected and needed revenue.

As fund raising has become vital to institutional survival, a variety of research projects have been undertaken to develop an understanding of who supports higher education through contributions. One primary area of examination has been undergraduate involvement, namely, the involvement of students in different

organizations, particularly fraternities and sororities. The argument has been made that the more intense the involvement, the more satisfying the collegiate experience, and potentially, the more likely to provide financial support as an alumnus. The Resident Assistant, those live-in undergraduate students who are responsible for resident control, healthy environments, and assisting individual needs, is often considered the most intense form of undergraduate involvement (Blimling, 1995).

Existing research and literature revealed that although many studies have been done on factors that contributed to alumni generosity, the factor of being a member of the residence life department as a Resident Assistant has not been studied. This becomes of paramount importance when considering the financial need of institutions, and the need of institutions to maximize their efforts and develop a plan to assure a continued flow of contributions. The purpose for conducting the current study was to determine if alumni who were Resident Assistants gave more to the institution than alumni who were not Resident Assistants. The current study was designed partially for its heuristic value, and as such, focuses on a private church-affiliated university in Alabama.

Rationale for the Study

The study was designed to determine whether alumni who were resident assistants during their college experience gave more to their institution when compared to those alumni who were not resident assistants. This information is significant to the higher education community for several reasons.

First, the study was designed to raise awareness of the growing concern of the limited financial resources available for higher education institutions. Higher education in

the United States is at a fiscal flash-point. Ambivalence about public support of the enterprise, coupled with a decline in the pool of traditional-age students, is calling for new and aggressive approaches to institutional stability, including survival (Glennon, 1986). The next 10 years will be increasingly difficulty for higher education finances.

Since contributions from graduates play a large role in keeping colleges and universities financially sound, the question must be asked, what can be anticipated from alumni giving during the next 10 or 20 years (Bristol, 1991). In the academic year 1990-1991, 1,046 schools reported that alumni giving accounted for 7% of the educational and general expenses of higher education. Recently, schools have found that cuts in public support for higher education have made that 7% critically important (Lewis & Altbach, 1994; Brittiingham & Pezzullo, 1990; Rowland, 1986). Currently, one of the leading issues facing higher education is a mid-year budget cut, also termed "pro-ration funding." During the 1993-1994 academic year, for example, 23% of the public colleges and universities in ten states had mid-year budget reductions, 28% of the public colleges had no increase in budgets from 1992-1993 to 1993-1994, and 15% did not expect an increase before the year 2000 (Okunade, 1993).

Second, the study was designed to further the research on why alumni contribute to their alma mater. The process of building a knowledge base on alumni donors should be independent of the size of their gifts. Knowledge of all donors is important. Once alumni become donors, regardless of the size of their gifts, they are likely to continue their support (Eldridge, 1964). There is relatively little literature on the use of models to describe the dynamics of alumni giving (Willemain, Goyal, Van Deven, & Thukal, 1994).

Demographic variables can be significantly related to giving. Variables such as

family income, religious preference, occupation, age, gender, and academic major are just a few of the variables that could be considered when analyzing alumni participation activities (Taylor & Martin, 1995). Level of involvement in extracurricular activities often distinguishes alumni donors from non-donors. Shadoian (1989) and Oglesby (1991) reported that donors participated in more extra curricular activities than nondonors as undergraduates. Therefore, any additional information on alumni donors is beneficial to the efforts of institutions to raise financial support.

Third, by incorporating this information into future fund raising efforts, institutions will be able to develop more effective techniques and programs to reach alumni. Alumni giving has accounted for approximately one-quarter of all gifts to higher education (Bristol, 1991). The process of getting to know alumni will increasingly become important for institutions, and building relationships based on a satisfying college experience is an essential part of the effective fund raising (Scott, 1996).

Fourth, the research provides a valuable case study on the correlation of RAs and fund raising activities, and in particular, the study findings have a strong suggestive value for other institutions, which rely on fund raising. Additionally, the use of the RA position as a labor-intensive, comprehensive experience may be of great use to other non-profit agencies that depend on volunteers for the majority of their operations.

Research Methods

The study was limited to alumni of the private university from 1975 - 1990. A total of 300 alumni were selected at random for the sample, and divided into two groups: 150 were RAs as undergraduates and 150 were non-RAs. The population was 11,731,

and of these, 675 had been RAs as undergraduates. The sample size was determined by taking ten alumni from each graduating class year for the 15 year period of study. The listings were identified through the office of residence life and the office of development and all selections within each group were random and anonymous.

To guide the research and the data collection from the offices of development and residence life, the following research questions were asked:

1. What is a demographic profile of these graduate assistants over a 15 year period?
2. Do resident assistants matriculate at or above the university average?
3. To what extent is there a relationship between resident assistant involvement and donor status and/or alumni volunteerism?

Data were collected from internally managed data systems for each office. All data were collected from these respective offices in the winter and spring of 1998.

Data Analysis

Research Question 1

What is a demographic profile of these graduate assistants over a 15 year period? Data collected on RAs from 1975-1990 indicated that the demographic profile included the following characteristics: a non-donor to the university, lived in Alabama, did not generally participate in alumni activities, was female, Baptist, an Education major, married, and had two children. For those former RAs which did provide contributions, the average gift size was $103, with a range of $2,500 to $10.

Research Question 2

Do resident assistants matriculate at or above the university average? The data indicate that RAs do matriculate at or above the university average, although the difference was not significantly different. Those who were RAs during the time period of study graduated in an average 4.07 years, while the general population, as indicated through the sample of non-RAs, graduated on average in 4.103 years. A two-tailed t-test was used to examine these averages, but the difference was determined to be not significant (2.319).

Research Question 3

To what extent is there a relationship between resident assistant involvement and donor status and/or alumni volunteerism? Involvement by RAs in giving and volunteering were both determined to be low, but positive. For giving, using a Pearson Product Moment Correlation, the relationship was identified at a .101 level. For volunteerism, the Pearson r was determined to be .0512. Comparing these correlational indices with those for non-RAs, no significant differences were found using a two-tailed t-test for each correlation (non-RA correlations were .206 and .08, respectively).

Discussion

The collegiate experience is predicated on the duality of learning and growing based on formal classes and on the environment of the institution and the academic and social growth that comes from interaction between and among students. The difficulty in creating an environment for learning and living is the freedom often associated with out-

of-class experiences, and one of the few structured environments is the residence hall facility. The residence assistant (RA) is the individual who plays the crucial role of representative to the students, and is often caught in the middle between serving administrators who have specific rules and guidelines for behavior and students who may challenge guidelines or policy with individual needs.

The RA, as one caught in the middle, must serve two masters on an intensive schedule. Literature and practice has suggested that this intensity has an institutional benefit in the form of increased satisfaction with the college experience, and that this satisfaction may have a residual benefit in the form of alumni contributions. The current study, taking place at religiously affiliated institution in an urban setting, does not support this line of reasoning.

RAs are vital paraprofessionals in the student and academic affairs functions of colleges and universities, and their contributions in the form of service as undergraduate's needs to be better recognized by those outside of their direct line of supervision. Perhaps what is indicated in this case study is that students become somewhat disillusioned or mainstreamed in neutral feelings about an institution because they are not made to feel special or important in their service to the school. There must be an institutional recognition that education is holistic and dependent upon experiences outside of the classroom, and that academic affairs professionals are indeed responsible for helping to develop and foster this holistic atmosphere.

For others interested in the financial value of undergraduate involvement, there are a number of directions, which can be taken. Involvement intensity can continue to be examined in such areas as student government office holding, fraternity and sorority

involvement, and honor society involvement. A somewhat different line of inquiry but equally important is the administrative perspective on how to foster a feeling of philanthropy for students while they are still undergraduates, and what their beliefs are about the value of giving. Finance will continue to be important to higher education, and administrators in student and academic affairs are responsible for the extent to which this variable becomes a defining criterion of who attends college in the next century.

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